

"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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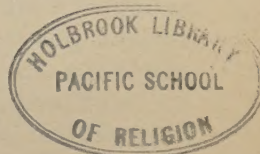
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Recent Rural Missions Insights and Principles*

By Arthur T. Mosher

A. Recent Insights



The Work Committee of the study, The Christian Mission Among Rural people, found that there are nine insights which occur very frequently in the discussions and literature on rural missions during the past twenty-five years.

1. The first of these is a realization of the importance of rural people to the Christian Mission. This importance arises from three facts: first, rural people are people, called to be sons and daughters of God; second, rural people comprise at least one-half of the world's population, therefore they are important from a numerical standpoint; third, rural populations increase while urban populations tend to decline, therefore the cities depend for their population on a continuous influx of people from the countryside, and urban institutions such as churches are made up to a considerable degree of people who were reared in rural surroundings. This means that the city church has to depend on the country for the Christian nurture of many of its future members.

2. The second insight is that there are certain characteristics of rural living which make it congenial to the development of a religious attitude and to appreciation of the Christian revelation. Among these are the following: (a) Farmers everywhere deal always with life, (b) Farmers everywhere are constantly aware of the impersonal forces of the natural world, (c) Farmers tend to sense their debt to the past and their obligation to the future, (d) Farming is a family occupation, (e) The small neighbourhood persists in rural life.

3. The third insight re-stated in recent years is that the Christian message is for the whole of life.

Because it brings to earth the will of God for men, the Christian message reveals the relationships which God would have prevail between all men, in their families, as individuals and as groups within their neighbourhoods, and in their relationships in the wider social order. It reveals the way in which God would have men regard the resources he has given them: bodies, time, abilities, cultural resources, and material things, and it determines standards for trusteeship of income. The experience of having God revealed through contact with Jesus Christ,

*This paper is based on a study, the CHRISTIAN MISSION AMONG RURAL PEOPLE, sponsored by the Rural Missions Cooperating Committee of the Foreign Missions Conference of North America and carried out by seven missionaries. Mr. Mosher, the Director of the study project, is Head of the Department of Extension, Allahabad Agricultural Institute, India. A printed report of about 320 pages, under the title of the study, will be published this summer.

and of seeking to follow his will for all of life, works changes which can amount to transformation in the inner lives of Christians.

In the light of such a comprehension, how futile it is to try to segregate the "religious needs," or the social or economic or physical needs of man. Man, rooted in the physical world of soil, plants, animals, society, birth and death, is called by a seeking God to become his child in the spirit. Truly, such a gospel is for all of Life!

Our danger here is not that we fail to accept this insight, but that we accept it with a too-easy assumption that we understand its implications. A recent publication of the World Council of Churches declares: "The task of demonstrating the relevance of the Christian message to the whole of life cannot be accomplished in a short while. It is a task of many generations. Perhaps our generation can only make a very modest beginning. But that beginning should be made. And it should consist first of all in thorough common study."

4. The fourth insight is that achieving Christian discipleship and witnessing to one's faith in God are phases of the same process.

The great eras of the witness of the Christian Church to its God, when the world has been shaken by this witness, have been in those times and places when Christians out-lived, out-thought, and out-suffered the culture in which they lived. There was a luminous compulsion about their very devotion to achieving Christian discipleship which drew others to them.

This is not to gainsay the witness in words or to set over against it the witness of example. It is, rather, to recognize that our error often has been the divorce of words from action, the mistaken impression that to witness to one's faith is one activity, and to achieve Christian discipleship is another. We have been re-discovering that every act and every attitude is at the same time a step toward achieving (or repudiating) Christian discipleship, and a witness to one's faith (or lack of faith) in God.

5. The fifth insight is the primary importance of the family in all human development and advance.

Man is an individual-social paradox. None of us is a person apart from his social environment. We are inescapably social. This means that in the same way that the activities of an individual person are indivisible, the activities of different persons within primary social groups are interesting, overlapping and indivisible.

Supremely in the family, we see this interaction, this interdependence, this solidarity of life within the social group. The faith of the father conditions the outlook of the children; the development of the children influences the faith of the parents. The child learns when the parent teaches; the parent learns from the reactions of the child. One child may be in a mood to play, when the welfare of the family requires that he be working. The illness of another child upsets the planned activities of the mother.

For the Christian family, there is added to the interactions between

the activities of each person's life and to the interactions between members of the family, the fact that each individual is seeking to live his life, individually and in the family, in the sight of God. Thus the family becomes the pre-eminent group, bound together in work, in worship, in health-building, in learning and teaching, in which Christians LIVE and LEARN TO LIVE together, each respecting the others, each seeking the welfare of all, each suffering in the common sorrows, each rejoicing in the common joys, each trying to do the will of God.

6. The sixth insight is the central place of the small neighbourhood in social welfare and action.

Increasingly, we are realizing the social power of the small neighbourhood and, conversely, the social loss where its intimate personal relationships are destroyed. Urban life tends to divide life into compartments. Neighbourhoods become specialized. Compulsory or voluntary "zoning" results in families of different economic standing losing contact with each other. Even within a city block, or within one apartment building, personal acquaintances are few. The primary social groups become special interest groups and tend to lose understanding of each other.

This does not happen to nearly so great a degree in rural areas. The persistence of the small neighbourhood is one of the positive values of rural living.

7. The seventh insight is the formative influence of group worship.

Bishop Pickett, in Christian Mass Movements in India pointed out the strong evidence of the power of daily group worship in molding the lives of Christians in central India. Charles Clayton Morrison analyzed this formative influence of group worship in The Social Gospel and the Christian Cultus. The insights of Christian discipleship must become the "confessional utterance of the worshipping congregation" before they will be assimilated into the life, into the customs and habits, of the Christian group. Group worship gives emotional rootage and compulsion to those insights which become convictions when the worshipping congregation puts them into explicit words, in unison, and declares: "We believe."

8. The eighth insight is a renewed understanding of the nature of church: the necessity for the church to become a true community.

One of the telling statements of this necessity is in the words of Dr. Visser T. Hooft:

"The main task of the Christian Community, and the greatest service which it can render to the world, is... to be the Christian community, for the real tragedy of our time is that we have on the one hand an incoherent mass of individual Christians, and on the other hand powerful impulses toward new forms of community, but no Christian community. Christians today do not form a true community; and the communities which shape the new world are not Christian. It is only when Christians discover that their faith is

a community-building faith, and when the community-builders discover that true human community can be based on a faith in a super-human community, that we may hope to get out of our present chaos... Before we gain the right to demand that individualism should be ousted from the social order, we must overcome individualism in the ranks of the Christian churches."

9. The ninth insight is that the principle of self-forgetful love applies as fully to the life of the Church as it does to that of individual persons.

We turn again to the words of Dr. T. Hooft, this time in the recent pamphlet "Reconstruction and Inter-Church Aid in Europe." He speaks there of "helping the parishes to realize anew the fundamental difference between the Church of Christ and an association to promote the religious interests of its members." For the Church to be the Body of Christ is for it to be primarily concerned about its loyalty to its Head and not about its own physical organization, or prestige, or even continued existence. The Church is a fellowship, a serving fellowship, a self-forgetful serving fellowship, when it is loyal to its Head.

B. Fundamental Principles for the Christian Mission Among Rural People

The foregoing are the fundamental insights which have been prominently before us in recent years. The Work Committee of the study of The Christian Mission Among Rural People sought to derive from these the principles which ought to underlie the program and attitude of any local group of rural Christians. It came to the conclusion that there are eight such principles.

I - Presenting the Christian Gospel in its entirety demands a variety of activities operating in every area and interest of life.

Preaching can interpret the role of skillful trusteeship of the land, but it cannot develop the technique of this trusteeship. Teaching in the rural school can influence the attitudes of pupils by contacts growing out of the hours spent in school, but it cannot eliminate the influence of contacts in the home. Health-building can provide a tool for effective discipleship and can exhibit loving concern for other people, but it cannot produce that emotional assimilation of ideals which is one of the contributions of worship. Each activity of the neighbourhood group, as of the individual, has its own function, makes its own contribution, and it is only by the well-integrated combination of these that the abundant life which is the Christian message can be expressed in the neighbourhood, through the full living of the Christian community.

It is supreme importance to understand that where the Christian program includes many different activities it does so not out of an expansive desire to embrace all good rural programs, but because these are essential to achieving Christian discipleship and to witnessing to the Christian revelation.

Whether or not all of the activities which contribute to Christian living

should be administered by the Church depends upon many local factors. In many instances, health activities, rural schools, agricultural education, and other programs may be carried on by other agencies, in which individual Christians may or may not be active. To the degree that these activities, even when not administered by the Church, are interpreted and influenced by the Christian group, they may be made parts of the Comprehensive Christian Program in Rural Areas.

II - The Christian Program must be carried on preponderantly by volunteer workers. All Christians should participate in the program and all should be trained for their responsibilities.

Most rural programs, whether Christian or not, must depend upon volunteer leadership, for it is not possible for the variety of activities needed in a rural neighbourhood to be conducted by professional workers. But there is a deeper necessity demanding that the Christian Movement be predominantly a lay movement. The Character of Christianity itself requires it. "Be ye doers of the Word" expresses the conviction that every Christian has a part to play in the task of Christian living. Much of the discipleship of each Christian will be expressed in his own farming, in her own home-making. But all are part of the Christian Community, and the activities of the church are the cooperative activities of its members.

In order that this total participation by the Christian Community may be effective, the church must provide adequate training for it.

III - A pastor or other trained leader is needed, exemplifying the Christian life enlisting and guiding the people of a neighbourhood in their Christian living, helping to interpret and inter-relate Christian activities, and connecting the local Christian group with the world-wide church.

The limitation on a Christian community which is exclusively a lay fellowship is imposed by the necessity of each member having to earn his livelihood by exerting most of his energies in a particular phase of the Christian life. For the community to achieve its full stature, it needs the constant attention of some one of its number. It needs someone who can devote his full attention to pondering its message, to caring for the state of its health, to weighing its emerging opportunities against its present abilities, to keeping its devotion bright, to keeping the machinery of its democracy working smoothly, to maintaining its relationships with the larger neighbourhood.

Most Christian groups have felt that the best way to provide for this important and difficult role is to train some of their members who possess qualities of Christian leadership for it, and then to provide the livelihood of the families of these men and women so that they may devote their full time to the welfare and tasks of the church. This is the Christian ministry. It is not a substitute for, but a means of achieving, full and effective lay participation.

That so many rural churches have become "preacher-centered," with the preacher expected primarily to preach and to carry alone the activities of all laymen, does not change the fact that such a state of affairs is not capable of producing sound, vital, Christian rural churches. The church forfeits its genius when it ceases to be primarily a participating, serving fellowship.

IV - Advisory and training specialists, fully aware of the breadth of the Gospel and in intimate contact with rural life, are needed for leadership in specialized fields and for training and assisting volunteer workers.

We have already noted that a variety of activities is essential to full presentation of the Christian Gospel. Many of these demand specialized skills. They require agriculturists, educators, doctors, etc. In some places, these specialists will be in private practice or in the employ of government. In others, they will be within the professional personnel of the Christian movement itself.

Inherent in the utilization of specialists is the danger of secularization and of segmentation of the life and thought of the church. In order to avoid this, each specialist participating in the Christian program should be fully aware of the breadth of the Gospel and of the way in which his specialty may be integrated into and contribute to the complete range of its activities. In order that his contribution may be germane to rural life, the specialist needs intimate association with a particular rural neighbourhood and with the total Christian program in that vicinity. He needs to be part of a rural neighbourhood in order that its problems may be his problems and its experiences his experiences, and he needs to be intimately acquainted with the whole Christian program in that neighbourhood in order that he may be able so to conduct his activities that they fill their place and keep their place in the total program. The danger involved in failure at this point is indicated by Dr. T. Hoofst:

"We have many doctors and lawyers and politicians who are faithful members of the Christian Church and who are loyally attempting to live as Christians in their private life; but we have almost no Christian doctors or lawyers or politicians who have thought through the implications of their faith for their profession and act accordingly... the general departmentalizing of life, together with the influence of modern individualism, has led to a situation in which it has become exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, for a Christian intellectual to relate his Christianity to his intellectual activities. And thus the intellectuals within the Christian fold, instead of contributing to the integration of Christian life and helping to work out a coherent framework of Christian thought and ethics, are today most often divided beings whose hearts are Christian, whose heads are pagan, and whose actions are therefore semi-Christian and semi-pagan."

V - The Christian Community, the Church, is the Body of Christ in the rural neighbourhood, and therefore responsible for mediating the Christian program.

It is the living of the Christian community: working, being friendly, co-operating, health building, studying, teaching, recreating, worshipping, preaching, which - together with the Bible and the Holy Spirit - brings the voice of God to rural people. Part of this living is individual, by members of the group; part of it is corporate, in activities in which they join together.

No better description of the Christian community can be found than that hallowed by tradition: it is the Body of Christ.

It must seek to serve its neighbourhood and its world as Christ would serve them. A healthy body responds obediently to the willing of its mind (its head). In this literal sense, Christ must be the head of each church. It is the task of

the Christian community to let Christ be its mind, to make His will its own, through prayer and consecrated study. It is the task of the Christian community in a rural neighbourhood to be the serving instrumentality of God's loving will for the neighbourhood.

It is the Body of Christ that the Christian community must assume responsibility for mediating the Comprehensive Christian Program. Its task is not to vitalize or to spiritualize a secular program of rural improvement. Its task is to achieve and to exemplify the loving, sympathetic, suffering participation of God throughout the whole range of the problems, perils, and potentialities of the neighbourhood.

VI - The Church should seek to integrate all neighbourhood activities essential to establishing the implications of the life and teachings of Jesus for rural people, itself providing for those activities not carried on by other agencies.

Integration in the task of Christian discipleship is what distinguished the Christian program in rural areas from secular programs for rural development. In the Christian program, agricultural improvement is not an end in itself but a phase of more efficient trusteeship of God-given resources. Health development is not an end in itself but is another phase of trusteeship. Education is never an isolated attainment but is always a training for competence in Christian service. Cooperative societies are not allowed to be considered a panacea, but remain that which they really are, a tool. No phase of the program is allowed to become an end in itself; it is (or ought to be) always related to other phases of a way of life which loves God and which sees the implications of the Good News of Christ for all phases of rural life.

If only the church would accept this role of integration in neighbourhood life, it would be in a sound position to recognize, utilize, and cooperate with many splendid neighbourhood programs now conducted under other auspices.

The Christian community has a responsibility to make its prophecy, its interpretation, its judgment as broad as all activities of the neighbourhood, by whomever administered, and to make the program it administers as broad as the needs of its neighbourhood not otherwise met.

Two types of integration have been found necessary where the church itself administers a broad program. First, it is necessary that the different phases of the program reach the same people instead of one phase reaching one group and other phases reaching other groups. Second, it is imperative that the different phases of the program be integrated within the leadership responsible for it so that each phase of the program makes its own contribution and respects the functions of others.

VII - The field of the comprehensive Christian program is the entire neighbourhood, including its regional and world inter-relationships.

Increasingly, we are coming to see that the field of the local church must be the whole neighbourhood: That health, both physical and spiritual, is indivisible, that in economic well-being most of a neighbourhood is interdependent, that "community is to be desired embracing the whole neighbourhood, shared in by Christian and non-Christian alike."

The Christian community, with all its members participating, should set up its program of activities for the whole neighbourhood, cooperating with non-Christians in the programs non-Christians may set up for neighbourhood welfare so far as these do not prejudice the Christian spirit, and accepting the cooperation of non-Christians in the enterprises of the church.

In many instances, maintaining its essential Christian witness will cause its members to be shut out of neighbourhood participation whether or no. But such exclusiveness should not characterize the program of the church. That program should recognize both the fact of social solidarity and the fact of the responsibility of the church to maintain its distinctive witness, seeking to make the whole neighbourhood the field of its activity, with all of its members a part of the working force.

It must be remembered that each rural neighbourhood is itself an inter-dependent part of its region and of the whole earth. Rural-urban relationships, the role of the farmer as a world citizen, his membership in the ecumenical church, his relationship with other races are thus all a part of the fabric of the rural neighbourhood.

"The church exists not for itself but to bring the holy and loving purposes of God to bear upon all the relationships and affairs of the neighbourhood family."

VIII - Permeating all of these activities should be an attitude of life -- sympathetic and forgiving, yet persevering and unswerving -- like that manifested by Jesus in all of his living and in his death on the Cross. The Christian Community should maintain this attitude at any cost.

In attempting to fulfill its tasks in the neighbourhood, the Church may or may not find congenial atmosphere and friendly response. It may be misunderstood and opposed by the government, by adherents of other religions, or by enlightened and unredeemed society. Its very loyalty to truth and right may be the factor that brings it most into controversy. For government may be biased and bigoted and given to unethical practices; the practices of established cults and religions may be deeply entrenched; business interests in the countryside may be given to exploitation; gambling and immorality may have deep rootage and be backed by vested interests.

Happy the Church with such moral strength and fiber within its own body, and with such degree of sympathetic support from outside, that it can face opposition and evil in all these fields with conquering virility.

No matter how many or how few activities may be carried on in the Christian rural program, it is only when Christians love one another and all people that the world receives the Good News through the testimony of their lives.